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HELEN TORR

1886-1967

June 3 — July 9, 1972

HECKSCHER MUSEUM

HUNTINGTON, NEW YORK

July 17 — August 18, 1972

GRAHAM GALLERY

NEW YORK, NEW YORK



INTRODUCTION

Helen Torr, who was affectionately called "Reds," received her early training in Philadelphia at Drexel Institute where she was a student from 1902 to 1905. During her time there she received two Honorable Mentions, one for her work out of doors in 1903, and one for life class in 1905. She later studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Among her fellow students were Charles Demuth and Clive Weed whom she married in 1913.

Clive Weed was a political cartoonist. It has been said that he frequented the San Carlos Café where he probably came in contact with Arthur G. Dove since the café was a meeting place for the circle of illustrators to which both belonged.

The Dove family moved to Westport, Connecticut in 1910. Some time later (probably 1919) the Weeds moved to Coleytown near Westport where they knew most of the colony of artists and writers in the area. It seems likely that Helen Torr and Arthur Dove began an exchange of ideas from the time of the Weeds' appearance upon the Connecticut scene. Their affinity as artists and persons is unquestionable. Neither enjoyed that kind of understanding from his or her spouse.

In about 1921 Helen Torr and Arthur Dove were living and painting on a houseboat in the Harlem River. By 1923 they had purchased the *Mona*, a forty-two foot yawl on which they lived and worked, except for winter months spent in a large upstairs room at the Ketewomoke Yacht Club. They lived simply and endured hardship and deprivation, but they had above everything else the great richness of shared understanding. Their ties of friendship with Stieglitz, Georgia O'Keefe, Alfred Maurer and others of this small group of the avant garde were very strong. Between 1934 and 1938 the Doves were in Geneva, New York, attending to family business. These were isolated but prolific years for both.

Living together in limited space, seeing and doing the same things, their work inevitably reflected the similarity of their life and thought. It is a measure of Helen's strength (a strength she never seems to have realized) that from the small body of work which remains, a definite personality, quite apart from Arthur Dove's, comes through.

Helen Torr's work is not primarily abstract although a charcoal drawing from the early 1920's is totally so. Both Helen Torr and Arthur Dove used actual elements of landscape as a point of departure for their paintings, but Helen remained closer to the actual image, and took special delight in feminine things like lace, feathers and glass objects. In such a painting as "Shell" she seems closest in spirit to Arthur, but the form of the oyster shell is still clearly visible. One finds in her work similarities to Georgia O'Keefe and Marsden Hartley as well, but one must remember that each of this closely knit group had shared insights and consequently one finds influences flowing between them.

Helen Torr's expression is essentially a stylized realism, never quite literal. In such paintings as "Oyster Stakes" or "Fall," one knows the actual scene, but finds the elements transposed. The great white clouds might be milk glass, the trees perform a dance in the fall wind, and the flags wave a gay greeting.

In a second style, which seems to have developed simultaneously with the first, the compositions are fragmented with consummate skill; in "Impromptu," dated 1929 each item is recognizable and seems to have been dropped at random, but the picture remains a whole. "Composition" of 1935 is one of her most mature works. In it whole small compositions have been worked into a patterned whole of great clarity and sophistication. There are several sketches for similarly organized works, but this seems to be the only larger oil in this vein which was completed, or which has survived. These compositions are probably influenced by the discipline of the designs on which she worked with the hope of having them reproduced on silk.

A group of charcoal drawing are not sketches for anything, but rather works of art in themselves. The compositions are fully developed and the medium is used to produce a velvety richness which far surpasses the usual charcoal study. In some cases there exist tiny studies for the final composition which resemble the sketches for her paintings.



The Doves returned to Centerport in 1937, but ill health was to strike Arthur almost immediately, and all of Helen's energies were devoted to his care and doing all of those energy-sapping chores which a painter must do before he paints. Perhaps a few small sketches of water fowl date from that period. After Arthur's death in 1946 Helen could not bring herself to paint.

The years between 1946 and 1967 represent a longer span of time than was required for the known paintings. Since the last years in Geneva represent painterly activity and accomplishment, the question is posed, why did she stop painting? Surely her energies were drained by Arthur's illness, and with his death her chief audience was also dead. She had shown twice in New York, in 1927 in a group organized by Georgia O'Keefe at the Opportunity Gallery, and in 1933 at An American Place with Arthur. In 1935 she seems to have expected another joint show, but Stieglitz wrote that he did not have room to show her paintings.

Critical acclaim has been heartbreakingly limited. McBride writing in *The Sun* (1927) had said "The group of small paintings by Helen Torr is attractive in color, and all the little pictures by her have a genuine warrant for their existence." But, since the show was chosen by O'Keefe, he wrote of all the exhibitors as her students or followers. In a review of the 1933 two-artist show, the *Art News* said, "Mrs. Dove alternates between abstract and naturalistic effects, and as often as not pays her husband the very sincere compliment of following in his footsteps." Only Sheldon Cheney in *Premier of Modern Art* in 1924 spoke of her work without reference to derivation. He "found something very moving about her drawings," and reproduced one.

In presenting this exhibition both the Heckscher Museum and the Graham Gallery hope that Helen Torr's paintings may finally find the audience which their creator so sorely missed.

Eva Ingersoll Gatling

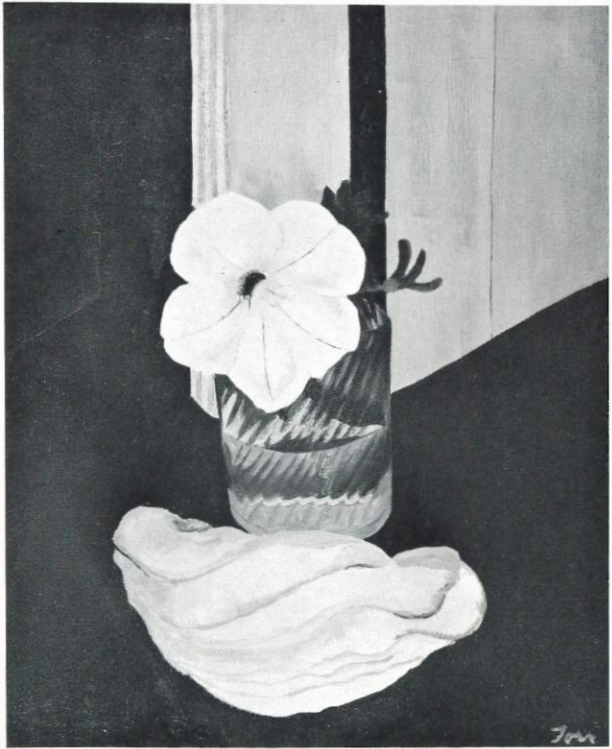


Unless otherwise noted all works are lent by the Graham Gallery. Italicized titles are those attached to the paintings in the artist's handwriting or noted by her in the joint diaries of Arthur G. Dove and Helen Torr.

WORKS IN OIL

1. *Match Box & Lemon*, 1926
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. William C. Dove
2. *Abstract Flowers*, c. 1927
Lent by Eva Ingersoll Gatling
3. *Mountain Mood*, c. 1927
4. *Rocky Peaks*, c. 1927
5. *Extemporaneous*, 1927
6. *Plant in Glass*, 1927
7. *Flower Rhythm*, c. 1927
Lent by Mary Rehm
8. *Shell*, 1928
9. *Houses on Barge*, 1928
10. *Flower in Glass*, 1929
11. *Paper Plates*, 1929
12. *Corrugated Building*, 1929
13. *Impromptu*, 1929
Lent by May Davis Hill
14. *White Feather*, 1930
15. *Design with Flame*
16. *Imagined*, 1930
17. *White Plant*, 1930

18. *Shell, Stone and Feather with Bark*
19. *Tulip and Tree Flower*, 1930
20. *Feather and Shell*, 1930
Lent by Dr. Mary B. Holt
21. *Quince on Hand Dish*, 1930
22. *Melodrama*, 1931
23. *Dogwood*, 1931
24. *Oyster Stakes*, 1931
Heckscher Museum Collection,
Gift of Mary Rehm



25. *From a Flower*, 1932
 26. *White Dish on Abstract Design*
 27. *Light House*, 1932
(also entitled *White Cloud*)
 28. *Along the Shore*, 1932
 29. *House in Trees*
 30. *Self Portrait*
 31. *Fall*, 1935
 32. *January*, 1935
Heckscher Museum Collection,
Gift of Mary Rehm
 33. *Church*, 1935
 34. *Composition*, 1935
Lent by Eva Ingersoll Gatling
- DRAWINGS IN CHARCOAL
35. *Geometric*, before 1924
 36. *Porthole*
 37. *On Board Ship*
 38. *Landscape*
 39. *Grasses*
 40. *Grasses*
 41. *Drapery Study*
 42. *Trees in Wind*
 43. *Drawings for Melodrama*, 1931
(charcoal and pencil)
 44. *Abstracted Buildings with Tree*
 45. *Abstracted Buildings*
 46. *Abstracted Buildings with Bare Trees*
 47. *Vegetable Still Life*
 48. *Basket of Vegetables*



49. *Nasturtium Leaves*
 50. *Drawings for January*, 1935
Heckscher Museum Collection,
Gift of Mary Rehm
- DRAWINGS IN PENCIL
51. *Drawing for Houses on Barge*, 1928
 52. *Drawing for Oyster Stakes*, 1931
Heckscher Museum Collection,
Gift of Mary Rehm
 53. *Ducks on the Beach* (pencil and crayon)
- OIL SKETCHES
54. *House in Hills*
 55. *White Sails*
 56. *Leaves and Feathers*
 57. *Fragmented Landscape*

SKETCHES IN GOUACHE AND WATER COLOR

58. Circus

59. Spools

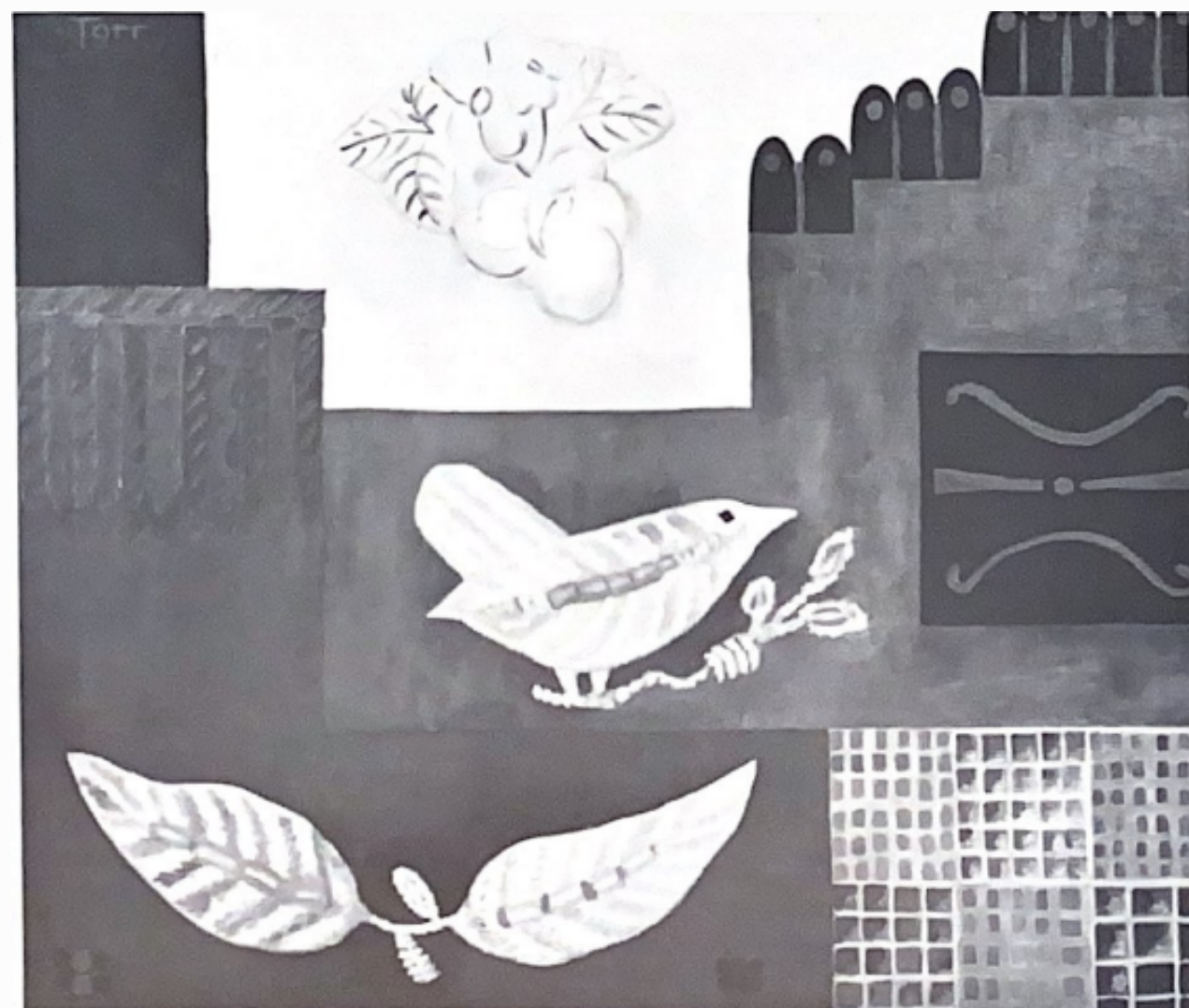
60. Hexagon and Circle

61. Sketch for *Composition*, 1935

Lent by Eva Ingersoll Gatling

62. Gulls

63. Four Sketch Books



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In preparing this exhibition the Heckscher Museum wishes to express its thanks to those who have lent from their collections. Special thanks are due to Mary Rehm who first called our attention to her sister's work, and to William C. Dove who made available the joint diaries of Arthur G. Dove and Helen Torr, who is consistently called "Reds." The diaries are brief factual accounts of day-by-day activities in which many of the titles and dates of Helen Torr's paintings were recorded.

The Graham Gallery has undertaken to handle Helen Torr's paintings and the Museum is grateful for the opportunity to show her first exhibition with them.

LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION:

Mr. and Mrs. William C. Dove

Eva Ingersoll Gatling

May Davis Hill

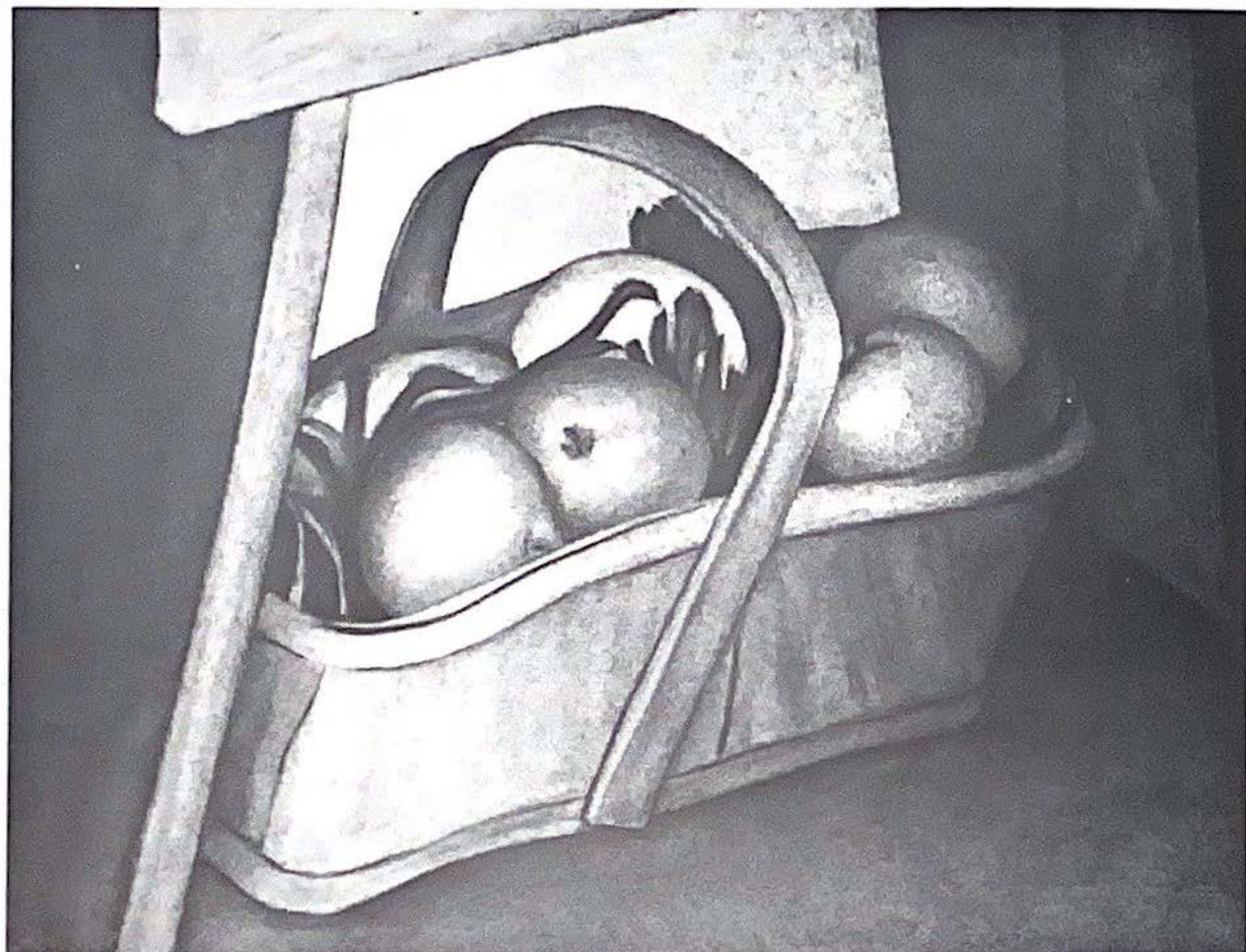
Dr. Mary B. Holt

Mary Rehm



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